

stale French bread, day-old pan bread could be toasted and served.

No matter the origin, the loaf's perfection rides less on the bread than on those oysters. Like all Gulf Coast oysters, they are far less briny than their northern counterparts and nearly four times the size — warmer water means more food available to the oysters — and as such are perfect for frying. Like most in the city, Casamento's arrive from P & J Oysters, which has been selling Louisiana bivalves from their center of operations in the French Quarter since 1876. (A poster on Casamento's wall shows the name and number of P & J's oyster collection zones.) The oysters are shucked just minutes before they're fried, thanks to the team up front, who have merely to open a door to a refrigerated chamber to let more crustaceans tumble onto the tabletop. (One of the shuckers is the entertaining Michael L. Rogers, who, with 30 years of experience and several shucking competition wins under his belt, has a business card that announces he'll open oysters for catering outfits and parties.)

C.J. runs the stoves, the BlackBerry headset behind his ear one of the only signs of modernity in the kitchen, a circa-1919 setup more akin to your great-grandmother's than to any restaurant's. Six days a week, if you walk through the kitchen (as you must to get to the restrooms), you'll see C.J. at work in a T-shirt with the sleeves cut off, standing over batches of oysters bubbling away in a few deep, beat-up pots filled with amber lard. He knows precisely what shade of golden-brown is right. He also knows when the oysters are at their best — the place closes each summer — which means that from June until August, you'll just have to settle for a po-boy.

— Rachel Wharton

Books

A Particular Sharpness

Japanese Kitchen Knives: Essential Techniques and Recipes

by Hiromitsu Nozaki with Kate Klippensteen, 160 pages, Kodansha International, softcover, \$29.95 (2009).

In Japanese cuisine, the word for a chef is *itamae*, literally “before the board,” originally a reference to the head cook of a restaurant, who stood before a cutting board and sliced the ingredients — the most critical job. According to Naomichi Ishige, the revered authority on Japanese food, knife skills were routinely demonstrated in the banquets of the nobility from the Heian period (794–1192) on, and by the late Middle Ages formal kitchen slicing procedures were codified for fish. Today, cooks studying classic Japanese cuisine typically undertake apprenticeships as long as a decade, of which a large part is spent slicing.

“The knife is truly the foundation of Japanese cuisine, and the act of cutting is fundamental. An oft-used maxim in Japanese cooking, ‘*katsu-shu-ho-ju*’ ... means ‘Cut first, then simmer,’ stressing the belief that ‘to cut’ is actually ‘to cook,’” Hiromitsu Nozaki writes in the foreword to his excellent book, *Japanese Kitchen Knives*.

Nozaki, chef of the acclaimed Tokyo restaurant Waketokuyama, has written 40 cookbooks in Japanese; his co-writer in this instance, Kate Klippensteen, covers Japanese food and culture and has lived in Tokyo for more than two decades. They present a lucid introduction to traditional Japanese blades as well as how-to instructions for slicing fish and vege-

tables, step-by-step photos ingeniously shot from the chef's perspective, recipes, and even a disquisition on fish anatomy. I visit Japan frequently to study the food, once training for a few weeks at a hallowed kaiseki restaurant (the first time a Westerner had ever stepped into the kitchen to work). And this is the first English-language book I've found that digs into the subject in such delightful detail.

The authors describe precise knife techniques, including rotary peeling, whittling, gutting, splitting a fish head, three-piece filleting (yielding two fillets and the skeleton), and five-piece filleting (four fillets and the skeleton, for flat fish); they introduce cutting styles with names such as the needle, serpent's belly, tea-whisk, pine-cone, spotted-fawn, and plum blossom. They explain that the differences aren't mere whimsy. Knife work improves the flavor of an ingredient; every cut has a purpose. Carving lattice patterns into slices of raw squid tenderizes it and helps hold sauces. Whittling long burdock roots as if you're sharpening a pencil, to reduce them to shavings, allows the fibrous vegetable to cook quickly and evenly. Cutting daikon into needle-thin shreds creates a garnish that, paired with sashimi, cleanses the palate and diminishes fishiness.

These diverse techniques owe their existence to classic Japanese knives. While Western cooks typically rely on the all-purpose chef's knife, in Japan special blades evolved for specific foods. My favorite photograph in the book shows 16 styles of knife, 41 knives in all, each designed to slice a different ingredient — fish, octopus, bony conger eel, poisonous blowfish, vegetables, soba noodles. The blades have in common one critical element: unparalleled sharpness.

“There are several factors that give

traditionally forged Japanese knives their extreme sharpness,” explains Nozaki. “Their single-ground” — single-bevel — “construction is one reason, but the techniques used in forging are also vital. These knives are not cut from a steel sheet” — like typical chef’s knives — “but are made from chunks of molten steel, hammered many times until they take shape. The repeated heating and hammering, along with annealing, quenching, and cooking, make the steel hard, yet elastic, and give it the strength to hold an edge.”

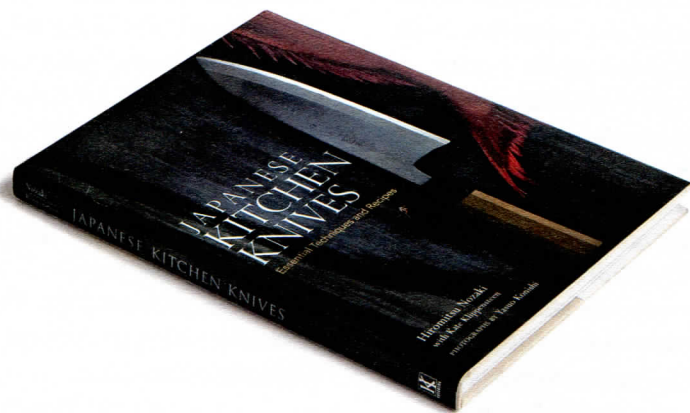
The incredible sharpness and special shapes explain why, for example, the *yanagiba*, the long, slender knife ubiquitous at sushi bars, is the perfect instrument for slicing raw fish. “Because of the length of the blade,” the authors write, “very little pressure is needed when drawing it from heel to tip through the fish.” And since the knife is ground on just one side, it applies the pressure to just one side of the ingredient. It glides through a fish’s soft, elastic flesh instead of crushing it, resulting in clean, glossy slices that enhance the taste.

Besides the *yanagiba*, the author goes into detail describing the function of the two other principal traditional Japanese kitchen knives: the *deba*, a heavy knife for gutting and breaking

fish, and the *usuba*, for slicing vegetables. The *usuba* is particularly intriguing. The standard-issue chef’s size, such as I own, has a nine-inch blade, thin and broad. At first blush it seems overkill to use this huge knife to tackle, say, a slender Japanese eggplant. But the unique broad shape is just what makes the *usuba* so effective. When perfectly sharp, the weight and thinness let you cut through vegetables using almost no effort. “With the *usuba*,” the authors explain, “slicing is accomplished with a motion called *utsu* in Japanese: moving the knife slightly toward the far side of the board while cutting straight down.” The precise mechanics allow Japanese chefs to use extremely delicate techniques, such as *katsuramuki* rotary peeling, which renders a daikon root into one long, paper-thin sheet.

Japanese Kitchen Knives is a must for all those seduced by Japanese cuisine. But any serious cook can benefit from learning about these blades. Nozaki puts it eloquently: “The act of cutting with the exquisitely sharp edge of a single-ground, hand-forged knife is truly enjoyable, even thrilling. No one who has ever felt this thrill could go back to the tedium and frustration of cutting with a dull knife.” I can tell you firsthand, it’s a remarkable thing to experience.

— Harris Salat



Not to Be Outdone by Itself

Larousse Gastronomique: The World's Greatest Culinary Encyclopedia

1,206 pages, Clarkson Potter, hardcover, \$90 (2009).

An interest in old cookbooks is influenced by what you can afford. It was my good fortune in the late 1970s to happen into the Corner Bookshop in Greenwich Village. Eleanor Lowenstein, whose collection when she died some years later was bought by the American Institute of Wine and Food, loved every book in her crammed shop, so much that when she found out that I was a professional cook and not some decorator who would buy a book to cull the plates and discard the rest, her prices came *way* down.

One day I picked up an old French edition of the *Larousse gastronomique*, and I heard her voice from across the room: “You should buy it.” I already owned the 1961 English translation, but she reminded me that nothing is better than the original and that this was a first edition (which, she said, instead of warning readers away from rhubarb leaves, told them they could be cooked like spinach). Larousse’s 1,087-page cooking encyclopedia bore the imprint of Prosper Montagné, one of the great cooks of his time, and he had only one collaborator, Dr. Alfred Gottschalk, who provided expertise on medical matters and culinary history. Montagné navigated seamlessly between classical cuisine (Escoffier wrote the preface) and regional specialties (the cassoulet entry is particularly fine — Montagné was born in Carcassone and worked in Toulouse, the two cities which with Castelnaudary form the famous trio of cassoulet types). He used 19th-century

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